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Kashmir: The Hindu nationalist, the liberal, and the logics of coloniality

Photograph from the funeral of pro-freedom armed fighters taken by Waseem Dar.

By Ahmed Bin Qasim

For the Kashmiri Muslim who desires liberation, i.e. *Azadi*, from India, two common responses have historically emerged. First, Indian liberals (and, liberals in general) pathologize this desire, turning it into an illness and an abnormality that ought to be explained, accounted for, and remedied. It is argued that something must have caused the Kashmiri Muslim, who is now seen as a patient of sorts, to have this desire.

Causative explanations emerge, like a) he desires liberation because he is unemployed/poor, b) he desires freedom because the army beat him up or because of the muscular policies of the state, or c) he has been brainwashed or misguided by Pakistan. In other words, the desire for liberation in Kashmiri Muslim is rendered pathological. He would not have wanted to be free from India, so it is said, if such and such an event in his life had not occurred. For the liberal, therefore, what the Kashmiri needs is therapeutic confinement and treatment in the hospital. The liberal theorization then holds that if this Kashmiri Muslim is treated well, the pathology of desiring *Azadi* would go away and the Kashmiri would be healthy again. Health here signifying a state of being where the Kashmiri would feel a sense of belonging in India, a *natural* belonging that was supposedly ruptured by the alienating forces of poverty or a bitter experience of torture at the hands of the Indian armed personnel.

Second, the Hindu nationalist, instead of prescribing therapeutic confinement, emphasizes punitive measures and imprisonment. A Kashmiri desiring *Azadi* is not a patient who requires liberal empathy, but a criminal/traitor who has to be violently disciplined and punished. The Kashmiri is seen as beyond redemption, beyond hope for treatment, and beyond cure. Both views are dehumanizing, though the liberal perspective is more condescending, as it implies that the Kashmiri Muslim is unaware of his own *real* desire. The Hindu nationalist recognizes that the Kashmiri seeks liberation and punishes him for it, acknowledging that roads, employment, or tolerance will not change it. Both views overlap, however, in their characterization of anticolonial liberation as a problem that must be denied.

Take for example the case of Article-370. For the Hindu nationalist, Article-370, which granted Kashmir a measure of nominal juridical and political autonomy whilst being subjected to overall Indian sovereign power, was a wall that precluded Kashmir's *complete* integration with India. Hence, for the past seven decades, they had been calling for its end and in August of 2019, it was abrogated. For some Indian secular nationalists of Nehruvian disposition, on the other hand, it was not a wall but a tunnel that would enable Kashmir's gradual integration with India. For them, Kashmiris should be allowed to feel different and special, so long as the recognition of difference does not translate into a call for liberation. Now, a superficial reading of the two positions may see the first one as oppressive and second one as not, but what's missed is the underlying presupposition that guides both, the desire for Kashmir's integration with India. The difference is merely procedural or methodological. It's not a question of *whether or not* India should colonize Kashmir, or *whether or not* Kashmiri Muslims should be subjected to Indian rule, but rather, *how* to colonize, *how* to rule, which modality of power is to be applied and when. Other than the shared purpose of integration, both positions lay claim to being more effective, with the liberal Indians (or liberals in general) often chastising Hindu nationalists for *radicalizing* Kashmiris. What they mean by this is that the Hindu nationalist says out

loud what should not be said, provoking the Kashmiris. It's almost like a race between the two, both fighting to be more effective colonizers.

The liberal approach is characterized by a developmental progressivism, the idea being that gradually Indianizing Kashmir will better consolidate India's rule in Kashmir. Hence, the liberals have repeatedly called for *winning the hearts and minds* of Kashmiri Muslims, because according to them, the Hindu nationalist approach of *ruling by dint of violence and gun* is not long-lasting and effective. By winning the hearts of Kashmiris, it's a power that operates at a deeper level, targeting the very psycho-spiritual constitution of the Kashmiri and ending the call for liberation once and for all.

Conversely, the Hindu nationalist hears the Kashmiri Muslim demanding liberation and interprets it as such, affirming its apparent meaning and then punishing him for it. The Hindu nationalist even goes on to excavate the call for *Azadi* in the everyday utterances and attitudes of a Kashmiri Muslim that do not explicitly refer to it. Whereas when the liberal hears the Kashmiri Muslim demanding liberation, they deny its apparent meaning and begin unearthing what they believe is the real or latent meaning. So, when a Kashmiri Muslim demands *Azadi* from Indian colonial rule, he must mean, so the story goes, everything but *Azadi* from Indian colonial rule. For liberals, the call for liberation is perhaps symptomatic of a deeper problem, a rebel Kashmiri's resentful plea to the Indian state to treat him well, like a child's protest against his father when he feels wronged by him. Another way to put it is that while the Hindu nationalist sees power in Weberian terms: the ability to carry out their will *despite* Kashmiri resistance or against it, presupposing that the will of Kashmiris is distinct and oppositional, the liberal aspires to a form of power that seeks to create *obedience* among Kashmiris, to create conditions in which Kashmiris will what the Indian state wills, desire what the Indian state desires, hence putting an end to the need to *overcome* resistance.

In 2013, Dilip Padgaonkar, an Indian liberal, who led a committee of three Indian interlocutors on Jammu and Kashmir, stated that the "People of Kashmir don't know the specific meaning of *Azadi*. They raise this slogan without knowing what they want...They did not want *Azadi* from India but wanted that their social and economic issues should be addressed." Similarly, P. Chidambaram, India's former Home Minister, and member of the Indian National Congress, stated that "when people of Jammu and Kashmir ask for 'Azadi', most of them mean greater autonomy." AS Dulat, the former chief of India's intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing, held that the "*azadi* that they (Kashmiris) want is accommodation. They want their honor, dignity, and most of all, justice."

Within the call for freedom, the liberal says, is a hidden expectation or longing for greater integration with India. Because if *grievance* is what the Kashmiri feels, grievance presupposes a relationship of positive expectation, of remediation. The idea that the Kashmiri struggle is all reducible to a mere *feeling* of grievance can be seen as a mode of depoliticization. It is the depoliticization of the source of all that's happening in Kashmir, as it substitutes, in the words of Wendy Brown, "emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to political problems". The liberal talks about Kashmir almost as if it's a question not of colonization, but of India's *bad manners* towards Kashmiris, and what's needed then is not decolonization but *sensitivity* or *improvement of manners* on the part of India.

To this, the *Azadi*-seeking Kashmiri Muslim may say that they do not simply resent India because it *mistreats* them, that their resistance does not stem from a feeling of grievance or disappointment. The problem is not that India

mistreats Kashmiris, but that Kashmiris are *subjected* to India's treatment in the first place. The terms and contingent manifestations of this treatment are not essential, rather the subjection is. You do not feel *let down* by a thorn when it bleeds you, because there's an expectation that it will. The problem is not that India is not generous towards Kashmiris, but that the *Azadi*-seeking Kashmiri does not seek its generosity. They do not want to be treated well by the Indian state. Rather, their contention is that India must not exist in Kashmir. What it *does* with its existence here is therefore irrelevant. The rebel Kashmiri contests India's power when it *allows* Kashmiris to live as much as it contests its power to kill them. He announces that the Indian state should bear no power upon the lives of Kashmiris. It should not bear the power to give nor should it bear the power to take.

In a [recent](#) piece published in the *Economist*, the author stated that "...rather than free Kashmir from separatist violence, poverty and corruption, the Modi administration's hardline approach appears to have made its political troubles even more intractable without making the region obviously safer, less wretched or more prosperous." Apparently, the problem is not that Kashmir is not free from Indian colonization, but that Modi failed to free Kashmir from the idea of a free Kashmir, it's this idea that the author has labeled as *separatist violence*.

As detailed in Neve Gordon's book *The Human Right to Dominate*, the liberal critic of Indian actions in Kashmir often requests the state to *behave*, to be more *responsible*. Gordon accurately describes how the liberal critic tells the very colonial state that is responsible for extrajudicial executions, torture, home demolitions, and rape, to be both the arbitrator of and protector from the very violations that it is carrying out. Gordon argues that this results in a paradoxical situation that enables the state to criticize itself while in effect producing its own legitimization. This paradox is characterized by a "tripartite configuration, operating as a complex and supposedly self-evident combination of protection from, protection by, and protection of the state." Take, for example, the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. By identifying the state and its officials as potential sources of genocide and human rights violations, the convention established protection from the state. However, it then required the same state to recognize the crime of genocide as a constitutive element of international law and to punish persons guilty of genocide, thereby ascribing to the same state the responsibility to protect. Hence, as Gordon notes, the citizen is simultaneously protected from and by the state. Lastly, as a tool that empowers the state to protect the citizen, the convention also provided the state with protection as well, and it did so by offering it legitimacy as the central actor and primary enforcer of the convention.

To put it simply, if a person occupies our home, it would be absurd to shift the primary focus from expelling the intruder to the question of whether or not the intruder lets us sleep and eat at our home. It would be even more absurd if we start thinking of permission to do so as an act of generosity. The Indian state in Kashmir is a colonizing force. Even if it were to let Kashmiris eat lavishly and sleep comfortably at their home, the main problem still remains. What are they doing in the home of Kashmiris? Why do they wield the power to "let" them sleep or not sleep? To "let" them eat or not eat? It is this power of *letting* that the *Azadi*-seeking Kashmiri seeks to dismantle. The problem is not the Indian *misuse* of power. Such an argument presupposes the possibility of just *use*. India's power itself, both in its permissiveness and repressiveness, is the fundamental problem.

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